

MESSAGES from LIBERTY

“VIEWS FROM THE CROSS”

(Luke 23:39-43)

Maundy Thursday

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One of the criminals hanging beside him scoffed, “So you’re the Messiah, are you? Prove it by saving yourself — and us, too, while you’re at it!”

But the other criminal protested, “Don’t you fear God even when you have been sentenced to die? We deserve to die for our crimes, but this man hasn’t done anything wrong.” Then he said, “Jesus, remember me when you come into your Kingdom.”

And Jesus replied, “I assure you, today you will be with me in paradise.”

We are so familiar with it, it’s hard for us really to appreciate it. Not only is the whole thing unbelievable, but it’s also sickening. This is the culmination of the life and ministry of Jesus, the Messiah, but everything has gone sideways:

- He’s not being hailed as the new Davidic king in Herod’s palace.
- He’s not leading the renewed worship in the Temple as the Righteous Judge.
- He’s not organizing an army inside the city walls to throw out the Romans.

He’s nailed to a piece of wood and stuck in a garbage pile, left to rot.

This is ugly stuff. The whole idea of crucifixion is ugly enough – but this is a good man, an innocent man, struggling to maintain his dignity as he’s losing his life.

Luke tells this story with the camera zoomed in close. We’re in tight – only three characters, three dying men. And as Luke records their interchange, we get three views from the cross. And the question is this: Is Jesus, the crucified one, able to save?

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The first criminal begins by tearing into Jesus. “Hey, Mr. Holy Man. I thought you were supposed to be the Messiah. Well, if that’s who you are, what is God’s gift to humanity doing squirming for breath? You’re not fooling anybody; you’re not fooling me; you’re only fooling yourself. Because if you were the Christ you could save yourself from all this – and us too. But I guess you just don’t have it in you, do you? You’re weak, and you’re a fool, and you’re dying.”

Bitter stuff. This man sees things in their harsh reality. Because if Jesus had power, if he really were able to save, he wouldn’t be hanging there. The first

criminal faces the facts: hanging next to him is a man just like himself – weak, powerless, fated to suffer the consequences. Not only is Jesus unable to save others, he can't even save himself. He's a joke. A sad joke.

So, the first view from the cross is this: divine power has no weakness. And the implication: Jesus is unable to save, because he's unable to save them from this.

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The second criminal has a different view from the cross. He hears the first man's abuse and has to speak up.

“Hey – don't you have enough problems of your own to start laying into this guy? You don't know *what* you're talking about or *who* you're talking to. Just remember – you're getting what you deserve. You belong here – and so do I.

“But this guy doesn't. It isn't right that he's here. They just couldn't take what he had to say. He told it like it is and they didn't like the way it was, so they're snuffing him out. You've got no right to yell at him like this.”

And then he turns to Jesus. “Jesus, they say you are the Messiah, the one sent by God to restore our country to freedom and righteousness. And I believe it. And though I don't know what you're doing here – it makes no sense – please have mercy on me when you come at that great day to establish God's kingdom. Though I'm about to die, I will trust in the hope of the resurrection at the last day.”

Hopeful stuff. This man can't understand why things are happening like this, but he has hope, nonetheless. This man believes that Jesus is the Messiah, and although everything is certainly messed up now, one day everything will work out right. The Messiah will return from heaven to set things straight, and he wants to be a part of it.

But can you see how this is hope against hope? Nothing about this situation gives any grounds for hope, because the Messiah is dying. The second criminal closes his eyes to what's happening and confesses that, despite his weakness, Jesus will demonstrate his power to save at the end of time. It's faith – but it's blind faith. To believe that power will triumph over this desperate weakness – the Messiah on a cross?

So, the second view from the cross is this: divine power can triumph over weakness. And the implication: Jesus is able to save – eventually, despite all this mess right now.

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Finally, Jesus speaks. He doesn't have much to say. He's weak and he's dying. He turns to the second man and says, "You can count on this: Today you will be with me in Paradise."

Pretty incredible words. So full of hope, such certainty. Salvation *today*! And yet, these words ring hollow. They offer so much from a position of so little. This is a dying man speaking. The only "today" for Jesus is that today is his last one.

Are these words believable?

- Do these powerful words have any credibility coming from a man who is the victim of the power of others?
- Do these saving words have any believability coming from a man who's unable to save himself?
- Do these words of life have any reliability from a man on the verge of death?

But this is Jesus' view from the cross. His power is divine – he can offer Paradise. But divine power isn't free from human weakness, nor is divine power ultimate over weakness – divine power comes *through* weakness. Jesus has the power to save, not *from* the crucifixion, not *in spite of* the crucifixion, but *through* the crucifixion. This is Jesus' view from the cross – today is salvation, because salvation comes through this cross.

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Friends: the event we're here to remember this evening is the event that has changed everything. Because in Jesus' death, God has done something powerful – He has wiped out the past and opened the future for life with Him.

- Because the power of sin is unable to defeat Jesus.
- Because the power of death is unable to hold Jesus.
- Because divine power is not negated by weakness, nor postponed by weakness, but God's saving power is unequivocally demonstrated *through* the weakness of Jesus on the cross.

God's power works through weakness. And the implication: Jesus is able to save. *Today* – that day in Golgotha, today in Columbus. God's redeeming power has been funneled through the weakness of the cross of Christ only to explode into new life and new hope. Through this cross of this man in this weakness, today is the day of salvation. And that is good news. AMEN

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